**Title of the Module: Samira Makhmalbaf and Blackboards**

## Introduction

Iranian cinema today holds a pride of place in world cinema, with prodigies like Mohsen Makhmalbaf, Abbas Kiarostami, Jafar Panahi, Majid Majidi, Asghar Farhadi and others contributing substantially to serious, social interventionist cinema. Since the late 1980s Iranian cinema has won phenomenal success and international acclaim. For the last four decades, films from Iran have been receiving an overwhelming number of prizes and awards at international film festivals including the Palme D'or in Cannes 1997 for *Taste of Cherry* (dir. Abbas Kiarostami), the Golden Lion in Venice 2000 for *Crimson Gold* (dir. Jafar Panahi) and Silver Bear in Berlin 2006 for *Offside* (dir. Jafar Panahi). This international visibility, recognition and distinction have given a fillip to Iranian cinema's serious engagement with socio-political issues of the country. Notable women film makers – Manijeh Hekmat, Tehmineh Milani, Rakhshan Bani-E'temad – have also emerged during the period who won international recognition for their socially relevant, experimental cinema. Samira Makhmalbaf, a significant name in Iranian cinema since the last decade of the 20th century, is a filmmaker known for her themes of social change and progress – like women's rights, and education– rendered in a poetic, surrealist fashion. In this lesson we will learn more about this acclaimed Iranian film maker and the thematic concerns and stylistic features of her films, with particular reference to the film *Blackboards*, released in 2001.

## Objectives

1) To understand the exponential growth of Iranian cinema since the late 1980s
2) To understand Samira Makhmalbaf as a representative Second Wave Iranian film maker
3) To explore the thematic and cinematographic features of Samira Makhmalbaf's films
4) To examine *Blackboards* as a representative post Revolution Iranian film
5) To critically assess the political and aesthetic potential of Iranian cinema

## Iranian New Wave Cinema

The New Wave in Iranian Cinema began in the 1960s. According to Ahmad Talebinejad Hamshahri, an Iranian film critic and writer, a new trend began in Iranian cinema since 1968 as an offshoot of the political, social, and cultural developments of the 1950s and 1960s. The advent of political and intellectual movements, the development of socially committed literature, the diffusion of a cinema culture through translation of academic scholarship on cinema in magazines, the emergence of film clubs etc. were some of the internal conditions conducive to the development of the New Wave. The influence of French New Wave and Italian neo-realist cinema also cannot be denied.

The New Wave films aimed at truly artistic and cultural cinema, distinct from the vulgar, obscene, low quality, formulaic films, often referred to as Film Farsi,

which were predominant during the period and which did not reflect the life of the Iranians or the artistic taste of the society. The trend was set off by three films, all released in 1969: *The Cow* (dir. Dariush Mehrjuyee), *Qaysar* (dir. Massoud Kimyayee), and *Calm in Front of Others* (dir. Naser Taqvaie). With the New Wave, there came about a shift in the perception of the public as well as the intellectuals about cinema. The ordinary people had hitherto looked upon the actors (the film stars) as the sole representatives of a film. There was no perception of the director as the creator, the principal thinker of a film. This popular perception about the creator of a work changed with the New Wave Cinema. Intellectuals who had looked upon cinema of the Film Farsi kind as vulgar and obscene came to view cinema more seriously as a cultural category at par with literary and artistic productions.

The first New Wave ended with the beginning of the 1979 Iranian Revolution. The New Wave trend continues in Iranian cinema, the present New Wave being the logical extension of the 1960s New Wave. Notable film makers of the Post Revolution New Wave include Abbas Kiarostami, Mohsen Makhmalbaf, Samira Makhmalbaf, Jafar Panahi, Majid Majidi, Asghar Farhadi etc.

**Post 1980s Iranian Cinema**

The Pahlavi regime which preceded the 1979 Islamic Republic was characterised by a modernisation and westernisation drive. Naturally the cinema of the period was criticised and censored for its depiction of rural poverty and backwardness that would damage the nation's prestige abroad. The Shia clergy were strongly opposed to pre-revolution Iranian and imported cinema which featured women singing and dancing on the charge that it posed a threat to public morality. The 1979 Islamic Republic headed by Ayatollah Khomeini promoted cinema as a tool for educating the masses in the principles of Islam. With cinema being put in the service of Islam, it came to be legitimised. However, this legitimisation came with restrictive guidelines to keep in line with strict Islamic doctrines. Close-ups of women were banned; so were scenes that could sexually arouse the viewers. Secular films and films with overt political content – the films of Mohsen Makhmalbaf and Jafar Panahi, for example – provoked fierce onslaught from the conservative clergy. Naturally, the reformist faction in the Islamic Republic, even while promoting less controversial films, mostly ignored films with overt political content. The threat of censorship does not, however, deter the Iranian film makers from exploring socially and politically contentious subjects. The strictures were greater in the case of women. Women were not allowed behind the director's chair, a restriction that was relaxed later.

The post 1980 films which won top awards at international festivals share certain features: non-professional actors as cast, filming on location rather than in studios, long takes, blurring of the boundary between documentary and fiction, open ended narratives, etc. These films invariably portrayed the lives of urban or rural poor with little dramatization or fictionalisation. With such realistic subjects and treatment, the films have a slice of life quality about them. These films were internationally received as humanist with terms like poetic realism and neorealism being applied to them.

**Women Filmmakers**

Iranian cinema is known for its prodigious women directors and film makers who poetically experiment with the medium to escape censorship. Since the 1990s a significant number of women film makers have emerged, whose percentage is higher than in most countries in the West. Major names include Rakhshan Bani-Etemad (*Nargess*, The *Blue-Veiled*, *Our Times*), Samira Makhmalbaf, Hana Makhmalbaf (*Joy of Madness*, *Buddha Collapsed out of Shame*), Tahmineh Milani (The Hidden Half, *The Unwanted Woman*), Manijeh Hekmat (*Women's Prison*, *Three Women*, *The Girl in the Sneakers*, *A Bunch of Grass*). Niki Karimi, (*To Have or not to Have*, *Final Whistle*), Marzieh Meshkini (*The Day I became a Woman*, *Stray Dogs*), Shirin Neshat (*Women without Men*, *Looking for Oum Kulthum*) and Massy Tadjedin (*Last Night*, *The Jacket*). The formidable presence of women as actors, script writers and directors in an Islamic country like Iran appears paradoxical to the western viewers. Samira Makhmalbaf draws attention to the paradox in response to western audience's questions on the subject and making of her debut film: Is Iran a country where 13 year old girls can be locked up for 11 years (this forms the subject of the film *The Apple*) and where an 18 year old girl can have a first film at Cannes. In response Samira observes that Iranian women are like fresh water springs; the more pressure applied the more force they show ("How Samira Made")

**Samira Makhmalbaf: The Director in the Making**

Samira Makhmalbaf, who has proved her mettle as film director, producer and script writer, is one of the most influential figures in Iranian Second Wave cinema. Samira's debuting as director coincides with the heyday of Iranian cinema, the 1990s. Aware of the sexist prejudices in the traditional Iranian society against women film makers, Samira makes a conscious attempt not to internalise this mind-set and to challenge the societal constraints on women. The real challenge, according to Samira, is the self-censorship on women necessitated by the culture and traditions of the Iranian society, rather than the political censorship imposed by the government ("How Samira Made").

As the daughter of Mohsen Makhmalbaf, the doyen of Iranian cinema, Samira had an early exposure to the world of films. She grew up listening to her parents discuss films and watching her father filming and editing. She also acted in his films, debuting at the age of 7 in the 1987 film *The Cyclist*. At 14 she left school. "I hated school," she once said. "They tried just to give you answers, answers, answers and not let you experience or ask questions or see differently" (Mowbray). This is exactly what she attempts to do through her films. Soon after she left school, she joined the Makhmalbaf Film School to study cinema for the next five years. The School allowed its students to major in one of the disciplines of film making and Samira's choice was direction. Samira directed two video productions before venturing into feature films.

**Filmography**

"I want to reduce human pain through my films. There are things in the world that are harsh. I want to change the world according to my own share. …

Cinema can change thoughts. That is why I am in cinema," Samira once said in response to the question "Why do you make films?" Her films show an abiding concern with the suffering and distress of mankind, mostly man made. (Interview).

Samira directed her first feature film *The Apple* (1998) at the age of 17. The film was invited to more than 100 international film festivals and was presented at Cannes Film Festival. Other major films of Samira are *Blackboards* (2001), the segment "God, Construction and Destruction" in the documentary film about September 11 titled *11'09"01 - September 11* (2002), *At Five in the Afternoon* (2003) and *Two Legged Horse* (2008).

Samira's films have a docu-fiction quality, i.e., they walk the line between documentary and fiction. She casts non-professional actors mostly, appropriate for the kind of themes she takes up for exploration. Her debut film *The Apple*, for instance, casts the same family whose life it features. Samira describes her experience of working with non-professional actors for the film *Blackboards* as both hard and easy. "It was hard because they didn't know what was cinema. They wanted to take a holiday during production for some religious practices and I said, no, it's not possible. But it was easy also ... I chose all these characters because of the geography of their faces one by one; if you love your characters, they can feel it. And when you feel it, it's easier to direct them. It was a challenge, but it was not impossible" (Byrd).

Made by an activist film maker, Samira's films are political, but in a metaphoric way. Samira believes that metaphors are born from the imagination of the artist and the reality of life making love to each other (Kaufman).

Bert Cardullo mentions two qualities as characterising the cinema of the Islamic Republic of Iran: its children's films (films about the young though not necessarily for them) and its self-reflexivity, i.e., posing serious questions about fiction, reality and film making (649). Samira's *The Apple* shares both these qualities: it is a film about children and is self-reflexive, being a cross between documentary and fiction. This 85 minute long film features a family consisting of the sixty-five-year-old Ghorbanali, the father; Soghra, his blind wife and their twelve-year-old twin daughters, Zahra and Massoumeh. The twins have been virtually imprisoned by their father in their Tehran home since birth because he fears that the girls' honour would be besmirched if they came into physical contact with any of the neighbourhood boys, their blind mother being incapable to take care of them. The girls do not bathe, walk clumsily, are illiterate, cannot even speak their native Farsi and do not know any children other than each other. The people in the neighbourhood petition the local government to intercede on behalf of the girls. On receipt of the complaint, child welfare authorities secure the release of the girls and returns them to their father only after wresting from him the promise that he will not lock them up again. But the father soon revokes his promise. The film does not portray the girls as being sad at their confinement, for they do not know of a better life. A woman social worker ultimately releases the girls; she also turns the tables on the father by locking him and his wife and giving the key to the daughters.

The opening scene of the film may be viewed as an illustration of the poetic, metaphoric potential of Samira's films. The scene features the arm of one of the girls stretching out through the bars of the gate, which keeps the girls locked in and into the cinematographer's frame to pour water from a cup onto a potted plant**.** Bert Cardullo draws attention to the metaphoric character of this scene. "Water, naturally, is what Zahra and Massoumeh require, figuratively as well as literally, if they are to grow, for they are not (or need not be), as their father benightedly believes, flowers who will automatically wilt in the sun of men's gazes" (650). The film uses little or no music to enhance the performance of the actors (or rather, non-actors for none of them are professional actors), a trend distinct from the song and dance packed movies of the Film Farsi.

*At Five in the Afternoon*, Samira's fourth film and third feature, has feminist politics at its centre. The film, shot in Afghanistan soon after the US Invasion, documents the struggles of Nogreh, a Pakistani immigrant in Kabul, to acquire education, now that a democratic government has taken over, following the fall of the Taliban. A daring young woman, Nogreh attends a newly opened secular school, while pretending to go to a misogynist religious school, to please her conservative father. The film shows Nogreh changing from black shoes to white heels every time she is out of her father's sight **(*video)**. The spunky girl that she is, Nogreh also harbours a dream to become the president of her country. She is supported in her political ambitions by a young poet who has returned from Pakistan.

The struggles of Nogreh's family are shown amidst the desperate efforts of the refugees who have returned from exile to find shelter among the bombed out ruins of Kabul. The film does not end on an optimistic note with the closing scene showing Nogreh and her family walking away from the camera to a remote place where her father hopes to find shelter away from the influx of refugees who, he thinks, are not religious enough.

The film has not been quite favourably received by critics. The film's engagement with the question of women's political participation does not appear anything more serious than a casual flirtation, observes Elahe Dehnavi. Dehnavi also points out a loose structure, inconsistent scenes, superficial dialogues and not so engaging a story as some of the flaws of the film (162). The conversations between Nogreh and her sister in law about the ailing child are repetitive and there is a surfeit of images of hunger and poverty.

It must be said to Samira's credit, however, that she does not limit her critique to the Afghan Taliban; she trains her guns against the norms and strictures of patriarchy everywhere. The Iranians and even the Americans have their own Taliban, she says (Mowbray).

*Two Legged Horse* (2008) is a film written and edited by Samira's father. When Samira first read the script, she found it too surreal and shocking, but it kept haunting her until she felt compelled to make it. The film is a gruesome, uncompromising take on the dynamics of power. Because of the problems the Iranian regime had with Samira's father she could not shoot the film in Iran; so, the film was shot in Afghanistan. The film explores the master-slave relationship between a disabled boy and a poor child, Mirvais, hired as his caretaker. Treated

like an animal – a horse or a donkey (hence the title of the film) – Mirvais is subjected to both physical and verbal abuse by his 'master'. The film's portrayal of Mirvais' forced transformation from a human to an animal state – strapping of rough cords in Mirvais' mouth and hammering of horse shoes into his boots – is gruesome and chilling, forcing many viewers to leave the theatre at the premiere screening of the film in Toronto**.** The film also shows Marvais' complicity in his own oppression. For instance, there are scenes in which the young disabled boy makes Mirvais pick the rocks that he knows will eventually be thrown back at him. Through this Samira allegorizes the way oppressive states function.

The power-powerlessness dynamics in the film is structured as a three stage process: first there is a mutual fear; second there is a gradual absorption wherein the powerful and the powerless absorb each other and end up behaving like each other and finally there is a mutual eroticism where suffering becomes a habit and eventually pleasure (Interview). With such an invasive and psychoanalytically informed critique of the operations of power in totalitarian regimes, the film transcends its immediate setting and gains universal relevance. The film's message is that humans regress to animal-like behaviour under oppression. Samira's depiction of violence in the film is meant to provoke critique against violence unlike the popular Hollywood films' use of violence for entertainment.

Samira continues her technique of casting non-professional actors in this film also. To play the disabled boy of the film she finds a beggar in the streets of Afghanistan; a child labourer from the streets is cast for the role of Mirvais. The deformity of the second boy caused by an explosion makes Samira's job of directorial training extremely difficult. Samira describes the painstaking but rewarding process thus: "We practiced with him for 40 days. After two weeks' practice he managed to run well. Then we gave him a backpack filled with one kilogram of salt and he ran with it. Every day we added another kilogram of salt to the bag until on the fortieth day he was able to run a few kilometres with a 25 kilogram bag of salt" (Interview). This testifies to Samira's rigorous, exacting, but democratic and thoroughly professional approach to film making.

Apart from four feature films, Samira also contributed a segment "God, Construction and Destruction" to *11"09'01 – September 11* an international documentary film project about 9/11 consisting of 11 films from various countries. Each of the 11 short films in the project has a running time of 11 minutes, 9 seconds and 1 frame, intended as a response to the 9/11 attacks on the Twin Towers. The film, set in Iran, explores the post 9/11 experience of a group of Afghan refugees driven into exile by the dire circumstances in Afghanistan following the Soviet war. Fearing US retaliation, the refugee camp dwellers undertake the construction of a shelter to escape military bombings. The film captures the urgency of the situation and the nervousness of the refugees, the timing and sweep of the impending retaliation remaining uncertain. The crudeness of the refugees' brick building efforts as a defence against atomic bombs drives home to the viewers the defencelessness of the Afghan refugees. The film, with its focus on the efforts of a teacher to impress upon the refugees the importance of educating their children, has a thematic continuity with *Blackboards* (which will be discussed in detail in the following

section). The film, as does *Blackboards*, problematizes the aims and role of education in the life of people living in conflict zones and the mode of education to adopt therein.

### *Blackboards*

*Blackboards*, Samira's second feature film, is a poetic exploration of the distressed and deprived lives of the homeless people of Kurdistan. The film, which won a Special Jury Prize at Cannes 2000, features a group of freelance teachers with blackboards strapped to their backs, straggling along the rugged, war ravaged, but wildly beautiful mountainous terrains between Iran, Turkey Iraq and Syria, looking for students to teach. The film focuses on two teachers in particular. One, Reeboir, offers to teach a group of boys smuggling contraband goods across the borders, in return for bread. Said, the other teacher, joins a group of Kurdish refugees from the Iran-Iraq war who are trying to cross the mountains and reach their homeland. The refugees decline Said's offer to teach but pay him in walnuts to guide them to the border. Said also offers to help the refugees by allowing a sick old man to be carried on his board. A running irony about the blackboards of the title is that they are used for virtually everything other than the purpose for which they are designed. They are used, for instance, as a shield against the frequent bursts of gunfire and shelling, a stretcher, a splint for a broken leg and even as an item of dowry.

The teachers, despite being the focus of the film, enjoy no more status than the people whom they attempt to teach. Their competence to teach comes under cloud when we understand that those whom they seek to educate know far more about what is going on in the world around than they who proselytise knowledge. The heavy blackboards being ostensibly their only qualification to teach, the teachers look even more naïve than the children to whom they preach the importance of learning.

Along with the horrific effects of wars, particularly on children, the arbitrariness of borders is also one of the thematic concerns of the film. It is the characters' efforts to cross the border between Iran and Iraq that drive the narrative forward. But the border soon stops being a recognisable place and becomes a nightmarish zone. In fact, the idea of the film germinated with the landscape. Once while walking with her father in Kurdistan Samira is struck by the inhospitality and barrenness of some parts of the landscape and she chooses these as the location for her film. Landscape is treated in the film in such a manner that there is a realistic emphasis on the relationship between characters and their living environment. The characters are hardy and stubborn, set as they are against the steep, stony, inhospitable landscape.

Displacement and disconnect characterise the lives of all the Kurdish characters in the film. They "become 'lost', 'disconnected' from the landscape, and the landscape itself dissolves into disconnected spaces of desolation." (Chaudhuri and Finn 48). The film's editing reflects the theme of disconnect. In contrast to the spatial continuity from shot to shot one finds in Hollywood films, editing in *Blackboards* is marked by spatial disruption, which illustrates the instability of space and the disorientation in the lives of the characters. The conversation scene involving one of the teachers and an old man who wants him to read out

his son's letter serves as an example of this spatial disconnect. The camera alternates between the characters, but there is little common space from shot to shot. Chaudhuri and Finn identify this spatial fragmentation as a characteristic of the House of Makhmalbaf films (48).

There is a love element in the film with one of the teachers, Said, falling for the only woman in the group of Iraqi refugees (she is the only significant female character in the film) and deciding to marry her. However, Said's declarations of love fail to evoke any response from the woman and the couple breaks up once they reach their destination. Romantic conceptions of love and the rhetoric of education and its importance hold little meaning in the lives of these people, ravaged as they are by war, conflict and violence.

The Kurdish community is shown as steeped in poverty and superstition and the film's portrayal of this fatalistic, disadvantaged group of people is mostly bleak. The film makes a sparing but effective use of a harsh ethnic soundtrack as a fitting backdrop to the grim political world of Kurdistan. The menacing character of the landscape is underscored by the film's use of off-screen sound indicating helicopter surveillance and border patrols.

Samira's father co-scripted and edited the film, as he did her first. "The idea for the film came out of my father's mind when I was looking for a subject to do for my next film. He gave me three or four pages and then it was time for me to imagine it. But I couldn't simply imagine it. How can I sit here in Cannes and think of people living in Kurdistan? So I had to go in it and be involved in it. So I cast the actors and found my locations, and at the same time, I let the reality of the situation come in. I don't want to kill the subject and put it in front of the camera and just shoot it as a dead subject. I let the reality come into imagination" (Kaufman). The poetic realism characteristic of Iranian New Wave films is evident in this film also.

Along with her insistence on experiencing the real, Samira also has an eye for the bizarre, the surreal. "The first image of the film starts with a very surreal image, but as you go into the film, you can feel the reality of being a fugitive. And I love this image very much and I think it can carry different meanings. It can express social, philosophic, and poetical meaning — so many metaphors, and yet also, you can go into their reality." There are several symbolic scenes in the film.

As is her wont, Samira uses non-professional actors in this film also, all except one. The boys who smuggle goods are all played by village children for whom smuggling, poverty and ignorance are everyday realities. The local people whom she casts speak Kurdish; a language Samira does not speak. With the help of the local assistant, she expresses herself in Persian, which the people understand. Though she approaches the actors with the written text of dialogues, she does not adhere to it scrupulously, given the unprofessional character of the cast. Dialogue would be improvised on the sets. The film bears testimony to Samira's conscientious and democratic approach to film making. *How Samira Made the Blackboard*, the video diary made by Samira's brother, Maysam Makhmalbaf, illustrates her painstaking efforts to train the non-professional actors. The documentary shows Samira making the crew trek for three hours to reach a freezing location near the border.

When life itself is at stake, people will forget their differences – cultural or otherwise – and come together. This is the message Samira wants to convey through the film and she does that through the small things in life.

The film shows "the clarity and grace of the new Iranian cinema, which seems to show a specific aptitude for the experience of children" (Bradshaw).

**Conclusion**

In her article 'Real Fictions', Rose Issa argues that Iranian films have a distinctively Iranian cinematic language "that champions the poetry in everyday life and the ordinary person by blurring the boundaries between fiction and reality, feature film with documentary." *Blackboards* is a film that stands testimony to this distinctively poetic, metaphoric, symbolic and aesthetically potent language of contemporary Iranian cinema.

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